results. Since the beginning of the Appalachian Prison Book Project (APBP) in 2004, the group has mailed more than 15,000 books. Ryan came to WVU in 2000, after completing her Ph.D. at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Before that she was doing outreach work in Boston with kids who were convicted of violent crimes and were transitioning back to life outside the penal system. “It was very sort of frontline work with young people who were facing insurmountable odds in many cases. It really made me aware of the forces arrayed against young people in certain parts of our cities,” Ryan says. But she felt it was a problem too big to solve. Her love of reading encouraged her to pursue a doctorate in English, from integrating academic life with efforts toward educational justice.

It all started with an American Prison Literature class in the fall of 2004. “The books that we were reading, which were largely autobiographical, were testifying to the transformative power of reading and writing,” Ryan says. “So I mentioned to the students that as far as I knew there were no organizations (in the region) that were sending free books to people that were incarcerated. It really was an opportunity for us to expand our academic studies into the larger world.”

Ryan, her colleagues, and her students spent two years fundraising, gathering books, and finding a space to put them—at one point operating out of a student’s apartment in downtown Morgantown. After the generous donation of an office from The Friends of the Morgantown Public Library, APBP sent a few postcards to the West Virginia Department of Corrections. Within three weeks, they were receiving letters from Texas, Arizona, Florida, and New Mexico.

“The requests are—I think—the most telling and important part of our project,” Ryan says. Requests range from books on health topics like diabetes to science fiction novels, history books to manuals on playing the mandolin. But the most-requested book by far is the dictionary. In addition to being an important insight into the life of someone behind bars, the letters APBP receives often express immense gratitude for the project. “Think that the prison book project depends upon in some ways the voices of those inside, assuring us that these are transformative resources, and needed intellectual and creative exercises—and more than exercises. I mean it’s reading,” Ryan says. “I don’t know how you describe what happens when we read, but there is something powerful about it and that’s why these letters are so important to us.”

In addition to mailing books, the Appalachian Prison Book Project now has its own book club at the federal prison in Hazleton. “We read our first novel, it was Kindred by Octavia Butler, and the conversation was hands-down one of the best discussions of literature we’ve ever witnessed, easily,” Ryan says. “When we left—after these two hours that were just totally exhilarating, and funny, and inspiring—we walked out with the correctional officer who’s helping us organize the group, and he turned to us and said, ‘Wow.’” It’s this type of experience Ryan hopes to cultivate more of. “There’s no question, I think, for anyone who were to witness that room, how important it is,” she says. “What we’re trying to do is to lift all of us up and achieve a stronger realization of these human and civil rights that are essential.”

Ryan’s achievements beyond APBP include the publication of essays in numerous literary journals and Demands of the Dead: Executions, Storytelling, and Activism in the United States, a collection she edited of creative and critical writing on the death penalty. In April 2014 she organized the first-ever educational justice and Appalachian prisons symposium at WVU. For Ryan, disturbing as it may be to have almost 3 percent of U.S. adults behind bars, what’s more disturbing is the fact that children of those incarcerated are much more likely to end up in prison themselves. “We can’t have a future that’s predicated on certain people going to prison,” she says. “We have to stop it.”